Vegetable

Sweet Potato

Grow

From Root to Stem

Did you know sweet potatoes and potatoes are different? Both are vegetables but sweet potatoes are roots and potatoes are underground stems called tubers. Sweet potatoes are long and tapered.[1,2,3]

Potato Perplexity

Sometimes, sweet potatoes are called yams, but yams and sweet potatoes are not the same. Yams are typically grown in African and Caribbean countries. True yams are rare in the United States.[1,2,3]

Availability

In North Carolina, sweet potatoes can be planted in May and June. Instead of planting seeds, sweet potatoes are grown from the sprouts of a bedded root called "slips." For planting, soil temperatures need to be 65°F. Slips should be planted 12 inches apart.[2]

Sweet potatoes require warm temperatures, growing all summer. They are harvested in the fall. Sweet potatoes are available year round in North Carolina.[1,2]

Fun Fact: N.C. is the #1 producer of sweet potatoes in the United States. Almost 50 percent of sweet potatoes grown in the U.S. are grown in the state.[1,4]

Choose

There are over a thousand varieties of sweet potatoes. Popular ones include Covington, Beauregard, Evangeline, Carolina Ruby, and O'Henry. Murasaki Purple and Grand Asia are fun varieties to try. Sweet potatoes can be orange, white, beige, yellow, pink, purple, violet and red.

Sweet potatoes should be clean, firm, fairly well-shaped with skins fairly even in color. Avoid potatoes with any decay or discolored, shriveled, soft or sunken areas. This decay can cause an unpleasant flavor.[1]

Fun Fact: All of the sweet potato is edible, even the skin. For extra fiber, try leaving the skin on when eating.[1]

Store

Store in a cool, dry, well-ventilated at room temperature, 60-65°F. Use within 2-3 weeks. While ripening, some fruits and vegetables produce ethylene gas. Sweet potatoes are sensitive to ethylene and can turn brown and develop an off-flavor. Store away from ethylene producers, like apples and pears.[1,2,5]

Fun Fact: The sweet potato became the North Carolina state veggie in 1995 after students at Elvie Street School in Wilson wrote letters to the N.C. General Assembly.[4]

Use

Sweet potatoes are sold whole (raw); as sticks, cubes, or discs (fresh or frozen); cut, mashed or pureed (canned); or dried. They are a versatile vegetable. Often, they are served baked, mashed or fried, but they can be steamed, boiled, microwaved, pureed, stir fried, sautéed or juiced. Wash raw sweet potatoes before cutting or preparing.[1,5]

Fun Fact: Did you know you can eat raw sweet potatoes? They are delicious and nutritious, raw or cooked.[1]

Image: Fotolia

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Teach

Around the World

Sweet potatoes originated in the tropical Americas at least 5,000 years ago. Christopher Columbus introduced the sweet potato to Europe. Later explorers introduced them to Asia. Today, China is the largest producer of sweet potatoes in the world.[3]

Presidential Potato

Before becoming the first United States President, George Washington was a sweet potato farmer.[6]

Fun Fact: Sweet potatoes can be used for more than just eating. Using many experiments, George Washington Carver, an African American scientist, worked to create over 100 new products from sweet potatoes such as ink, flour, starch, tapioca, vinegar, synthetic rubber, stains, dyes, paints and medicine.[6]

Class Activity

Materials Needed:

- Clear glass jar (large enough to fit the sweet potato)
- Wooden toothpicks
- Sweet potato
- Water

Steps:

1. Push 3-4 toothpicks into the sweet potato forming a circle around the center of the sweet potato.
2. Place the pointed end of the sweet potato into the jar until the toothpicks rest on the top of the jar.
3. Fill the jar with water to cover the bottom half of the sweet potato.
4. Place the jar in a window sill to allow the sweet potato to have access to sunlight.
5. Watch for the buds to form roots down into the water (in 2-3 weeks). Keep adequate water in the jar.
6. Watch for green leaves to sprout from the top of the plant. (The leaves grow as a vine.)
7. Plant the sweet potato into a pot, hanging basket or garden to continue to grow.
8. Have students observe, measure and record growth.[6]

Eat

A s-w-e-e-t choice and a super food!

Sweet potatoes are super-charged with beta-carotene, vitamins A and C, manganese, and fiber. Our bodies can turn beta-carotene into vitamin A. Vitamin A promotes normal vision, supports the growth and health of cells and tissue, protects us from infection and helps regulate the immune system. Vitamin C helps form collagen to hold muscles, bones and tissues together, protects us from infections and bruising, aids in healing, keeps our gums healthy, helps our body absorb iron and folate from plants, and acts as an antioxidant to prevent cell damage. Manganese plays an important role in forming bone and converting carbohydrate, protein, and fat into energy. Insoluble fiber aids digestion. Soluble fiber helps lower cholesterol. Sweet potatoes are cholesterol free and low in sodium and fat. About 100 calories are in one medium sweet potato (2 inches in diameter, 5 inches in length).[1,6,7]

Fun Fact: February is Sweet Potato Month.[1]

Potato Puzzles

Students can do math and science problems based on production, consumption and the nutritional value of sweet potatoes. They can survey their peers about how they like to eat sweet potatoes. They can write a poem, song or report. Classes or the whole school can conduct a recipe contest or a challenge to encourage students, staff and their families to enjoy more sweet potatoes.

Find

For more sweet potato facts and resources, visit:

1. North Carolina Sweet Potato Commission, www.ncsweetpotatoes.com
2. N.C. State Extension, www.ces.ncsu.edu
3. Nebraska Extension, http://lancaster.unl.edu/nep/fruitveggie.shtml
4. N.C. Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services, www.ncagr.gov
5. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, www.fns.usda.gov
6. Louisiana Sweet Potato Commission, www.sweetpotato.org
7. Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, www.eatright.org

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